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MEMOIR

OF

BENJAMIN FREDERICK BROWNE,

(READ MONDAY, FEB. 15, 1875.)

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Benjamin Frederick Browne was born July 14, 1793, in a house standing on the spot now known as No. 15 Winter street. He was carried to meeting at the East Church on the same day, and baptized by Dr. Bentley. He was a descendant in the seventh generation of John Browne, who joined the First Church in Salem in 1637, and was ordained a ruling elder of the church, August 29, 1660. The line of descent was through James, and Hannah Bartholomew; James, and Elizabeth (Pickering) Nichols; William, and Mary Frost; William, and Mercy White; Benjamin, and Elizabeth Andrew.

On the side of his mother, Elizabeth Andrew, he was a descendant, in the seventh generation, from Rev. Francis Higginson, the first minister of the First Church, in Salem. Two of his ancestors, Rev. John Higginson, pastor of the First Church, and John Browne, ruling elder, were ordained at the same time, Aug. 29, 1660.[1] His education began in the school of Madame Babbidge, in Essex street, in 1797. Among the most vivid recollections of that time was the memory of the cuffs, kickings and chasings he endured from the Federalist boys, because, his father being a Republican, he wore no cock-

[1] See Hist. Coll., Vols. v and vii, for genealogies of the Brown and Higginson families.

ade in his hat. His first hat must have been an object of tender regard, for he bought it with five shillings earned by picking up scraps of old iron and pieces of junk, and selling them at the Hingham boat, which came to Salem several times a year with a cargo of boxes and pails. He was a pupil of Mr. John Southwick, and joined in the frequent fights with Master Lang's scholars, at the time when the almshouse stood on the common, and the common itself was a dreary place called the town swamp, and frequented by horses, cattle, ducks, geese, hens and pigs. The streets were unpaved and unlighted. There were no police, disorderly persons thronged the streets, and the boys of different sections of the town frequently fought pitched battles with brickbats and frozen snowballs.

August 3, 1807, he entered the shop of E. S. Lang, apothecary, and son of Master Lang. There, after the custom of the times, he served an apprenticeship of five years. He finished his apprenticeship and lost his occupation in 1812, when the war with England had destroyed the commerce of his native city. Being young, very small in stature and in feeble health, he seemed to be deprived of business at home and a share in the warlike pursuits which were engrossing the minds of his townsmen. But his experience as apothecary's clerk enabled him to obtain a position as surgeon's assistant on board the private armed ship Alfred, in which he sailed in September, 1812, on a four months' cruise. Two English brigs were captured, having valuable cargoes of cotton, sugar and dye stuffs. The vessels and cargoes were confiscated, and the prisoners put on board a Portuguese schooner with bread and beef enough to last until they arrived in New York. In the third engagement a large armed merchantman was engaged, but as the captain doubted their ability to complete the capture, they sailed

away and left her, much to the disgust of the crew. Three days after, the general dissatisfaction culminated, when they fairly ran away from a large vessel, for fear it might be a man-of-war.

Benjamin was now nineteen years old, and, being neither fond of the sea nor eager for war, was at his wit's end in regard to the means of subsistence, when the owners of the privateering schooner "Frolic" offered him a place as captain's clerk. To this was added the duties of purser and sergeant of marines. They set sail with a motley crew, "hatless, shoeless, shirtless, graceless and unwashed," in a shapeless craft so singularly unfit for her work that, after the first "white squall," the sailors went aft in a body and promised to pay back their bounty money if the captain would only put them ashore again.

The vessel was remodelled, and again Benjamin, with a heavy heart and light pockets, went on board. The first capture was an American vessel sailing under a British license. Then, falling in with a fleet of English vessels in ballast, bound for Pictou and Merimachi for lumber, they captured ten or a dozen of them, and, after taking out the crews and the few articles of value, burned them. After a profitless voyage they refitted at Portsmouth, N. H., and were there when a large portion of the town was burned. They set sail on Christmas day, 1813, and after some exciting but profitless adventures, were chased below the tropical line by the English man-of-war, Heron. After a desperate attempt to escape, the captain mounted the rigging and announced their surrender. Benjamin was now nearly twenty-one years old, and as he stood a prisoner of war upon the deck of the Heron, his worldly possessions consisted of the checked shirt and duck trousers in which he stood. With such resources for comfort he entered upon a captivity of fifteen months.

The prisoners were taken to Barbadoes and confined in jail for a week, when the officers were admitted to parole. They were sent to England in August of the same year, in the seventy-four gun ship Benbow. From Plymouth they marched sixteen miles over the desolate hills to Dartmoor. Breaking a thirty hours' fast with bread, water and pickled fish, the prisoners, in their wet and muddy clothes, lay down to sleep on the stone floor, and so forgot their miseries.

Each man received a hammock, bed, blanket, pillow, and a bunch of rope-yarns to sling his hammock with, a wooden spoon, a tin pot, and to every six men a three gallon bucket. The prisons were dark, damp and gloomy, built of stone, with no furniture but rows of posts from which to sling their hammocks in tiers two or three deep. The British government furnished clothing, a coarse, yellow woollen jacket and pantaloons, with the king's broad arrow and the letters T. O. stamped on the back, a coarse woollen cap and woollen list shoes with wooden soles.

The situation of the prison was unhealthy, and during the year about one in thirteen of the four thousand died, while those who were considered well suffered continually from toothache, neuralgia and like ailments.

The prisoners had a market every day from eleven to two o'clock, and had liberty to buy whatever their scanty funds would permit. The British government allowed each man per day half a pound of beef, a pound and a half of bread, some turnips or onions and one-third of an ounce of salt. On Wednesdays and Fridays the bill of fare was one pound of herrings or codfish and one pound of potatoes with the bread. In addition to this the American government allowed each man two-pence half penny a day, paid in monthly instalments. In vari-

ous ways about eighteen thousand dollars a month were in circulation among the six thousand prisoners, or about three dollars apiece. In such a community this amount of money allowed them to practise upon a small scale all the commercial virtues and rascalities of the larger world outside. To some the pittance was made less valuable by inefficiency and unthrift, while others by industry, ingenuity and usury were able to take the cream of prison life. Young Browne by good fortune found a friend in one of those jolly, good-tempered spendthrifts who was always at his wit's end for money, but was always on good terms with those who had it. "The little captain" brought to their mess fabulous amounts of good cheer, beefsteak, saltfish, onions, potatoes, white bread and brandy. The brandy he kept, but the provisions he dealt out with bountiful hands. Impressed by the opportunities for gain, the two set up a shop for the sale of rum, butter, tobacco, coffee, tea, potatoes, etc. Trade prospered. The stock was sold at remunerative prices. But when the Tavistock grocer called for a settlement, the "little captain," like many another jolly fellow, had lost the run of the accounts, and, as he was cashier and treasurer, the burden of bankruptcy and subsequent payment fell upon Browne.

By the usual devices of prisoners, the dreary months of imprisonment were whiled away or endured at least, until worn by suffering, exasperated by petty oppressions and thoroughly convinced that their keepers were cold-blooded murderers, the prisoners became mutinous. The battle of New Orleans had been won. Peace had been declared, and men who thought they ought to be free were little inclined to endure the brutal treatment to which they had been subjected. Instead of attempting to conciliate them, Captain Shortland, the commanding officer, ordered out seven or eight hundred soldiers, who kept up

a murderous fire upon them for more than ten minutes. Then the dead and wounded were gathered up and life went on as before for another month. On the first of May, 1815, Browne was released from prison, a poor, feeble, emaciated youth, weighing just ninety-four pounds on the scales at Plymouth. In all the time of his imprisonment no tidings of him had reached home. Arriving in New York, he took sloop to Providence and stage-coach thence to Salem, arriving at sunrise in his native city, from which he was never long absent afterwards.

The foregoing account has been condensed, and by that process the interest has been taken out, from notes written in leisure hours by Mr. Browne, and published through the agency of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Dr. Browne (as we shall now call him by virtue of apothecaries' brevet) showed to him the narrative he had written for his own amusement, and Mr. Hawthorne, then a resident of Salem, was so much interested in it that he procured its publication in the "Democratic Review," in successive numbers, during the year 1846.

Dr. Browne gladly returned to the pursuits of peace, and during the ensuing fifty-eight years was known and honored as one of our most genial, honorable and trusty citizens.

He went into business as an apothecary with William Stearns, Nov., 1816, in the corner store of the Union street building. Jan. 1, 1823, he set up a drug store on the corner of Essex and Washington streets, in the brick building belonging to John Daland, now demolished to make way for the Eastern railroad. He moved thence, in 1828, to the shop on the west side of Court, now Washington street, opposite the city hall.

In April, 1833, he removed to a store standing on the spot now occupied by the brick building No. 226 Essex street, opposite the First Church. That store was burned

March 27, 1862. Jan. 1st, 1850, he took Charles H. Price, a former clerk, into a partnership which lasted until Jan. 1st, 1860, when he finally retired from business.

Dr. Browne was married Jan. 23, 1825, to Miss Sally Bott, daughter of John Bott and Lydia Henfield.

He always took great interest in the public organizations of his native city. He was for nearly fifty years connected with the Independent Congregational Church in Barton Square. As one of the marshals he assisted at the installation of Rev. Henry Colman, the first minister, and helped in the making and distribution of the punch which flowed freely on that occasion. He was master of the Essex Lodge of Free Masons from 1824 to 1827; commander of the cadets from 1825 to 1828; representative to the general court in 1831; state senator in 1843; postmaster of Salem from 1845 to 1849, and several times candidate for the office of mayor. He belonged to the democratic party for many years, and all of his public political life was spent in the service of that organization. But before the war of the rebellion he had grown into sympathy with the Republican party with which he quietly coöperated during the remainder of his life. In the legislature he showed skill as a debater, especially in the use of dry humor and an effective wit, manifested in caricatures of his opponents, which gave his logic edge and force.

The later years of his life, being blessed by a fortune adequate to his wants, were spent in comfort and leisurely quiet. He never lost his habits of regular attendance at his place of business until disabled by his last illness. He retained his desk, and, sitting in his comfortable arm-chair he watched, with genial interest, the passing of the busy crowds, received the greetings of his numerous friends, and kept himself in close and cheerful communi-

cation with the world about him. He was not left behind in his old age forgotten and forgetful, but made himself the special friend and patron of worthy young men, knowing the names, occupations and merits of all who came regularly under his notice, and often giving unobtrusive and valuable assistance with counsel, money or credit. He also indulged in literary and historical pursuits which showed that had his early life been devoted to them as his later years were, he would have become much more than an ordinary historian, and possibly a poet with claims to distinction. "The Papers of an Old Dartmoor Prisoner" had such peculiar merits, not merely from the interesting subject matter but also for the singular skill in narration and vivacity of style that it seemed as if Nathaniel Hawthorne, their gifted editor, must have added much from his own genius. But a careful comparison of the original manuscript with the printed copy shows that the narrative owes nothing whatever to the accomplishments of the editor except some slight use of the pruning knife.

In the fire, which burned his store in 1862, he lost notes containing the work of many years, in which he had put on record the contents of his wonderful memory of the men and events which had passed under his notice during eighty years of remarkably shrewd attention. Had it not been for this misfortune these "Collections" would have been enriched by many contributions and this sketch would have been unnecessary.

Dr. Browne was stricken with paralysis on the morning of Sept. 6, 1873. His mental powers were for a considable time unimpaired, and he watched the progress of his disease with philosophic calmness and the cheerfulness of a strong religious faith; until, after repeated shocks, his powers gave way, and he died, Nov. 23, 1873, in the eighty-first year of his age.